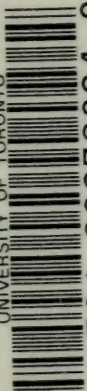


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TAGORE'S FATHER

A Life Sketch of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore)



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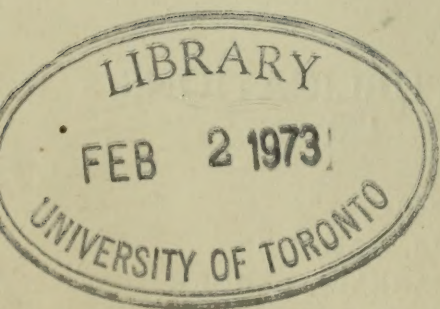
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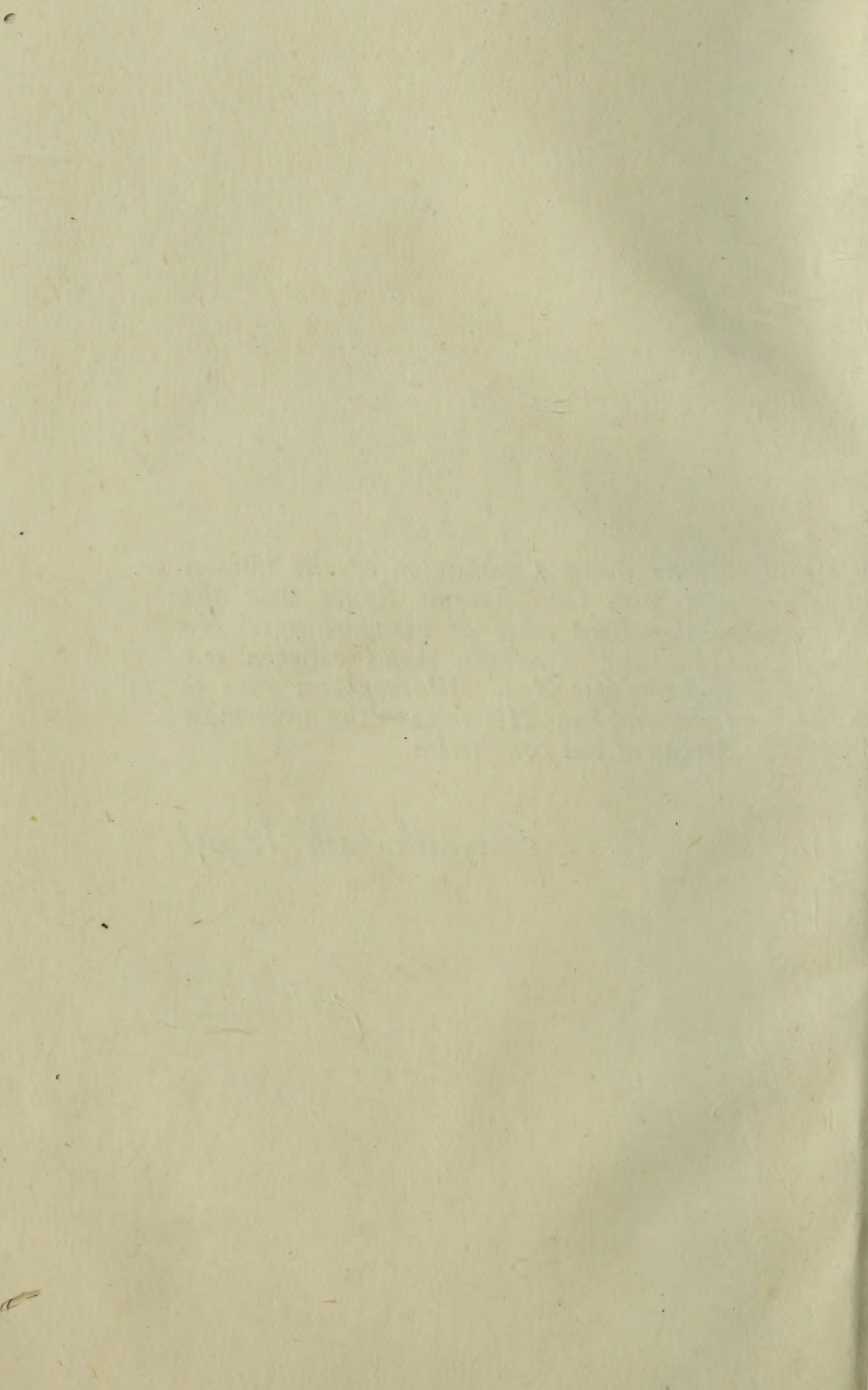
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The direct communion of the human soul with the Supreme Spirit was the most salient point of his teachings. No Gurus or Prophets stand between our soul and our God. We see him face to face, and hear His voice in the innermost depths of our conscience.

Satyendranath Tagore



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It is a common observation that old women love their grandchildren a great deal. Maharshi was fortunate enough to partake of the love of his grandmother. She was very fond of him. And he always considered her as his all in all. He spent the pleasant days of his childhood in the company of his grandmother. While sleeping, sitting or eating he did not leave her side. She was a staunch believer of her religion. She was very regular in her visits to the temple of goddess Kali. Young Devendra always accompanied her to the temple. Whenever it so happened that the grandmother went for the pilgrimage of sacred places leaving him behind, he wept very bitterly and his lamentations were a cry for dadi-ma (grandmother).

A few days before death dadi-ma told Devendra, who was then a grown-up lad, that whatever she had she would give to him and to no one else. After a short interval she handed over the keys of her box to him. He found in the box, when he opened it, a plenty of silver and gold coins.

According to the doctors' advice dadi-ma was brought to the river-bank. She remained living for three days by the side of the holy Ganges. When the curtain of her life was drawing to a close Devendra spent his days and nights by her death-bed. He was then only eighteen years of age.

Up to that time the hero of our tale had got all facilities of entertainment. He led a life of primrose dalliance. Hitherto he had never heard a call for the higher life. What is God? What is religion? He did not care to probe. He was never trained accordingly. He was in the dark; he had never seen the light.

Maharshi was born in May, 1817, in Jorasanko, Calcutta. His father, Dwarkanath Tagore, was a well-to-do personality. He was very lavish in his expenditures. His extravagance brought him the title of prince and he had the proud privilege of being called 'Prince Dwarkanath' by the people, in and outside Bengal, who knew him. Being the son of a prince Maharshi was brought up in grandeur and glory, though to form the religious side of his life dadi-ma's influence had a greater access.

He was about thirty years of age when his father breathed his last. At his death Prince Dwarkanath was in England. That was his second visit to England. From worldly point of view father's death was a great loss to Devendra because after that he had to face a host of troubles and to undergo unusual difficulties. But a keen observation could make one believe that the Invisible had put him to test to gauge the extent of his spiritual power. When the time came that he might perform the mourning ceremonies of his father, he had, as he was the eldest son of his father, to take the major part. . . He had to face a great commotion in his ownself.

About twelve years previous to this happening, when his grandmother had passed away, he found himself suddenly disillusioned and new realities began to dawn on his consciousness. At that time he was absolutely absent-minded. Life was an unpleasant role for him, and the worldly atmosphere was no less dreadful to him than the gravity of the moonlit night in a graveyard. Everything in this world had no taste for him and he failed to find any place

where he could get peace of mind. . . . One day after the demise of dadi-ma, when the evening sun was peeping from behind the golden screen of the west, this song broke from his lips :

“ Vain, oh ! vain is the light of day,
Without knowledge all is dark as night.”

and drew off the curtain of darkness from the eyes of his innerself. . . . This was his first song.

After that he began reading Sanskrit with all his fervour and piquancy. He was very fond of taking lessons in Sanskrit from his very boyhood, and was favoured by fortune in this noble cause ; he had ample facilities to fulfil this long-felt desire of his. Their family *purohit*, Kamlakant Chundamani, was a learned teacher in Sanskrit and Philosophy. He, very gladly, took charge of giving lessons in Sanskrit to the future Maharshi who in return promised to support the son of the Pundit after the latter's death.

He did not like to see God in the darkness of belief rather in the light of knowledge, and for this aim of his he had put every endeavour. He felt that with the knowledge of the outward things we can reach the inner core of our ownself. One day, when he was absorbed deep in thought, he imagined those days of his early youth when once he had a peep of the Infinite visible in the infinite heavens. Now, again, he gazed towards the sky with a meaningful look in his eyes. The sky was studded with countless stars and planets. In this heavenly beauty he happened to have a sight of the Eternal, and seemed to feel that it was His glory who has been the source of our limited knowledge, and who is the Creator and Protector of the universe. But He Himself does not possess any form or shape ; He is Light—an Eternal and Infinite Light. He did not create this world with His own hands rather He brought the whole universe into existence simply with His will. He is neither the idol of the temple nor the

image of the family. . . . These thoughts compelled Maharshi not to have the tinge of faith in idolatory.

Now, when he had to perform the mourning ceremonies of his father, Prince Dwarkanath, Maharshi was entangled into an unusual apprehension and he could find no satisfactory way to get out of it. All the domestic ceremonies were swept out by idolatory while according to the Brahma covenant he felt a duty, imposed upon himself, that he should not take part in the idolatrous rites. From every corner he was advised, and at the same time threatened in some way or the other, that it was no good for him to go out of the way and perish the ancient family convictions. But Maharshi had a very strong determination and was, in no case, inclined to submit to any such rite or conviction which, he knew, was contrary to his faith. Raja Radhakant Dev tried to make him understand in a very mild and proper way that to stand against the ancient faith was a clear indication of his being prepared to revolt against the society of the day, and that society could not bear to see its rebel exist in the world. His younger brother, Girindranath Tagore, also opposed him on the grounds that this procedure of his would enrage their near and dear ones who would be obliged to cut off all connections with them, and that such a treatment of non-co-operation from their own kith and kin would make their lives an unbearable burden. But Maharshi had the courage enough to bear all the difficulties he was expected to come across but could not, on any account, like to do contrary to his belief in which light of truth was visible to him. Consequently he was deserted all alone. But he was found more firm than a rock. He refused to participate in the idolatrous rites and performed the ceremonies according to the form which he had himself prepared for the occasion. This measure of reform raised a storm of opposition from his orthodox relatives, and

created permanent breach in the family. It was a heavy material loss to Maharshi. But the gain was comparatively of better nature. His relatives and friends deserted him but the Master of the three worlds, the Creator of the universe, the Infinite Eternal, his Almighty Father, generously holding him close to His bosom compensated his loss with an everlasting profit. He stood up against the popular superstitions and fallacies with a heroic zeal supported by a glimpse of the eternal light. Day by day this conviction was gaining hold on his mind that he who would gather immortal palms must not be hindered by the name of goodness, but must explore if it be goodness. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.

Prince Dwarkanath died buried under debris of debts. After his death when the accounts were checked, his liabilities amounted to about one crore while the assets were not more than forty-three lacs. Most of the debts were borrowed by the Prince to maintain his princely dignity and status. And all these debts were in the name of his firm. Prince Tagore, with a view to safeguard his generation, had converted some of his property in the form of a trust.

The manager of the firm, Mr. D. M. Gordon, called a meeting of the creditors and informed them that the proprietors of the firm were prepared to hand over every bit of their property other than that in the safety of the trust into which law did not allow anyone to have any access. When the proposal was put before the creditors they seemed inclined to accept it because no better approbation could be expected. But, such a proposal did not succeed to appeal Maharshi's sense of justice. He, after a brief consultation with his younger brother, declared that they would not avail themselves of the protection afforded by the trust, rather would place

everything unreservedly in the hands of their creditors till all their high liabilities were liquidated.

Beholding Maharshi's spirit of sacrifice the creditors were so much touched that—one of them, it is said, actually shed tears—after a deep thinking over the matter and with the intention of rendering true support they decided to take charge of the whole property and sanctioned an annual remuneration of rupees twenty-five thousand as a subsistence allowance for the bereaved family . . . This just treatment from the creditors made Maharshi feel extremely happy.

However, the creditors could not keep the property in their own hands for a fairly long time because they were so much impressed by Maharshi's clear conscience that within a period of two years they voluntarily relinquished the estate to his management. Although it took Maharshi plenty of years to clear off the debts with compound interests, yet he did not let loose the honesty of his intention to be impressed by the outward influence. His wise management and exemplary self-denial afforded him every convenience to pay off the debts to the last penny

An example of his honesty is exuding not merely from the matter of payment of the debts but . . . Prince Dwarkanath was extraordinarily generous; he never held his hand from free giving and munificence. He had made several promises of financial help with various institutions, but his sudden death blocked his way of fulfilling all such promises. However Maharshi considered it his maiden duty to honour the promises made by his father and besides abundance of other financial help he offered a charitable society of Calcutta, whom Prince Tagore had given a promise of the help of one lac of rupees, not only the promised sum but also the compound interest counting from the date of promise.

Once Maharshi was away to his *zamindari*

and was returning home after a long absence. It was a rainy season and the last day of *Savan*. There were dark clouds in the sky, and the river was in flood. The boatmen were standing at the bank of the river enjoying the scene of the storm. But no one of them had courage enough to row his boat in the river. The waves were leaping several yards high from the surface of the river and were making the boats at the shore dance in ecstasy. . . . But a fairly long time had elapsed when Maharshi left home ; he was very anxious, rather restless, to see his people at home. After midday when there was a slight lull in the storm, Maharshi asked the boatman if he could sail at that time. The boatman hesitatingly agreed saying that if his honour ordered him to do so. Maharshi felt some spiritual pleasure in this devoted reply of the boatman and requested him to put out the boat. The boatman reluctantly unfastened the boat and put up sails with confidence upon his God. Wind was blowing violently. With a few shoves the boat was away from the shore. Hundreds of boats were fastened to the shore. Seeing a boat in the river the boatmen cried out at the top of their voice, " Don't go ; turn back." The waves were rising high with such a zeal that at every moment a wall of water was seen in front of the boat. The boat could not keep itself still against the shocks of waves. The other shore was not visible. The force of the wind, the roar of the clouds, the range of the storm—all these would make Maharshi lose heart. The sound of the boatmen's voices was echoing in his ears. The boat had reached quite far from the shore.

The boat was set on sail with full confidence upon God and now there was no support available except the invisible hand of God. The boat was leaping forward dragging into the frightful waves of the river. Suddenly, Maharshi saw at a small distance another small boat jumping and leaping on the

surface of the water presenting a scene of a beautiful unconsolated child in the lap of her mother, just taken away from her breast. Within a few moments the boat was quite close to Maharshi's boat. The boatman was very much impressed by their courage and could not help saying, "No fear; go ahead." These words fell upon the ears of Maharshi as if someone had infused in him a fresh life. . . . Who was at such a time to encourage him? This was exactly the voice he wanted to hear; but, alas, where was the source of that voice? Did it come from the boatmen? No, not at all; that was an everlasting voice of the Eternal.

As soon as Maharshi began to feel that God was without shape and form, the feelings of abhorrence against idolatry arose in his mind. It was a usual practice of his that he used to remain out on tour during the days of Durga Puja festival; his main purpose to do so was that he wanted to remain aloof from the idolatrous rites and customs which had become a part and parcel of his family life and which were prevalent in the family in spite of all his endeavours.

Leaving aside the numberless places he visited in the Province of Bengal, Amritsar, Lahore, Multan and Rangoon are worth relating. He went to these places preaching and proclaiming the Brahma religion, and establishing Brahma Samajs where practicable.

Maharshi was on the verge of thirty-seven when his younger brother, Girindranath, passed away. He had been controlling the management of the firm with his judicious system of work, sufficient capacity for hard work, efficient competency for management and excellent ability in business. So much so that whereas the management of the firm was concerned, his death had created a void which at that time seemed something like impossible to fill in. By this time many debts had been cleared, many

still remained. Some of the creditors unable to wait any longer had filed suits against Maharshi Devendranath and had obtained decrees also. During those days Maharshi used to spend whole of his time, after breakfast, in the office of the Tatwabodhini Sabha, situated on the second floor in the Brahma Samaj Building, looking after the daily work of the Sabha. One day, after breakfast, when he was about to go to the Sabha his people requested him not to go there that day because they feared that there was a possibility of his arrest. But Maharshi, considering it an idle caution, went to the Sabha office without any fear and busied himself with his daily work as usual. After a short interval a Bengali clerk came up to him, a bit perplexed, and said in a very low voice, "Didn't I send you a word that you might not come over here today." After this pointing him to the bailiff standing by his side said, "He is Mr. Devendranath Tagore." The bailiff showed him the warrant and asked him to pay off rupees fourteen thousand at once. "I haven't got rupees fourteen thousand now," replied Maharshi. "Then come to the sheriff," asked the bailiff. So he sent for a carriage. When it came, the bailiff took him in it to the sheriff. As soon as the news of his arrest reached his family members a great consternation arose among them. Every one was saying that he had requested him not to go to the office that day but he did not pay heed to his warning and intentionally got himself into trouble. However, some of the family people stood his surety and he was released on bail.

No sooner did he come home than he heard that his uncle, Prasannakumar Tagore, was somewhat angry with him on the grounds that the latter did not consult him in any matter. He also said that if Devendra had taken his advice, he would have cleared off his debts. He, therefore, went to see his uncle next day. Prasannakumar gave him every consolation

and told him that he was not required to do anything ; he should let his uncle receive a whole of the income of his *zamindari* and his debts would be paid off by his uncle as soon as they fell due. In that course no one would worry Devendranath for his debts. . . . He agreed gratefully to that proposal and thereafter used to make over to his uncle the whole income of his *zamindari* while he undertook to clear off his debts.

Naba Bannerjye was present there that day and was talking with Maharshi with regard to the *Tatwabodhini Patrika*. Suddenly Prasannakumar interfered with a loud laughter and addressing Maharshi said, "Can you prove the existence of God?" "Can you prove the existence of the wall in front of you?" replied Maharshi. Prasannakumar laughed heartily at this quick reply and said, "Upon my word, what a question? We can see that wall is there, what's the need to prove?" "I can see that God is everywhere, what's the need to prove?" replied Maharshi. "Do you think God is the same as that wall?" said Prasannakumar "To me God is more near than the wall," replied Maharshi.

In 1856 when he was thirty-nine years of age, he went up to the Himalaya for the first time. Here he heard the voice on which was based his future. He spent about a year and a half among the Simla hills. During the whole of his stay there he remained absorbed in intense study and contemplation.

On his return to Calcutta he presented his inspired utterances in a series of sermons. As chance would have it, in case of almost every sermon he had to speak extempore. So there cannot be even a tinge of doubt in the correctness of their being the true reflection of his inner thoughts. It was the only reason that the audience could be affected a great deal by his sermons. His eldest son, Satyendranath Tagore, and others had taken his sermons into writ-

ing which were published afterwards in the form of a book entitled *Exposition of Brahma Dharma*.

No doubt Maharshi was deadly opposed to idol-worship, his instinctive actions smacked of orthodoxy. His ideals differed greatly from those of the educated young community of that age. In his opinion the ancient India was an affectionate bosom, open for all, wherein all such elements were nourished which according to the religious and moral convictions could be called pure in all respects. There would be no exaggeration if we say that he had imbibed the spirit of the ancient *rishis* more than any of his contemporaries. "It is singular," says his son, Satyendranath Tagore, "that the one field of religious inspiration which was foreign to him was the Hebrew Scriptures. He was never known to quote the Bible, nor do we find any allusion to Christ or his teachings in his sermons. His religion was Indian in origin and expression, it was Indian in ideas and in spirit."

In 1863 Maharshi bought a land at Bolpur, in Birbhum District, about 100 miles from Calcutta. There he afterwards made an abode of peace called Santiniketan. In those days Santiniketan consisted of a small house, a small garden, a *mandir* and a library. Besides, there were available all kinds of conveniences for meditation and solitude. In his early days he used to spend his time there with his disciples in contemplation, and the visitors who happened to come over there to see the place were entertained by Maharshi who felt pleasure in rendering such service. He dedicated Santiniketan with all its grounds and belongings to the public for the purpose of worship by a trust-deed.

There is many a year between his retirement from public life and death. During this long interval he spent many years in tours. Out of the places he visited Bombay, Cashmere and Hongkong are worthy of mention. For a short time he lived alone

in a separate house in the Park Street. But this separation did not last for a long time ; ultimately he returned to his ancestral home at Jorasanko, Calcutta.

Towards the last days of the year 1902, Maharshi's health gave way and since that time he was constantly ailing. Several times during the last days his life peeped through the darkness of despair but every time his strong constitution and a will to live staved off death. In those days of distress the following stanza from Hafiz was always on his lips :

“ The bell is tolling. I have heard the call
and am ready to depart with all my
luggage.”

At last he heard the call and on Thursday, the 19th January, 1905, at fifty-five minutes past one before daybreak he left for the eternal abode of peace.

“ Son of Dwarkanath Tagore and the first secretary, I believe, of the British Indian Association,” writes Shri Anand Mohan Bose in a letter addressed to Shri Satyendranath Tagore on receipt of the news of Maharshi's death, “ he might have been a maharaja long before this. But he chose for him the better part. Maharajas die but maharshis live in the grateful hearts of the unborn generations.”

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